



## RURAL ISSUES IN NGUGI'S *THE BLACK HERMIT*

Dr. Ahmed Adam Abdalla

(Assistant professor of English Literature, English Language Center , University of Tabuk , Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.)

### ABSTRACT



This study investigates the rural issues in Ngugi's play, *The Black Hermit*. It aimed at finding out the rural issues of African countries reflected by Ngugi and to propose some solutions. Following the descriptive, analytic and comparative approach, *The Black Hermit* has been discussed, rationally analyzed and compared to the Sudanese situation in term of rural issues. The findings have shown that there are many African rural issues that have been reflected by Ngugi such as: the weakness of education, suffering of the rural women, rural youth migration and the spread of tribalism and racism. The main causes of the issues are: distance of schools from the residence of students, shortage of teachers, textbooks, and unhealthy educational environment, the weak role played by the rural men and migration of men in general, the weakness of development in rural areas, economic pressures on youth and the spread of civil wars in rural areas. The findings also reveal that the issues mentioned above exist in many African countries, including Kenya and Sudan. The main solutions are: comprehensive African rural development, activating the role of the rural men, reducing the migration of rural youth through the development of their own areas and promotion of the sense of nationalism and unity and religious values.

**Keywords:** *Rural, Issues, Impacts, Migration, Areas*

**Citation:**

**APA** Abdalla,A.A. (2017) Rural Issues in Ngugi's *The Black Hermit*.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(2), 69-75.

**MLA** Abdalla, Ahmed Adam, "Rural Issues in Ngugi's *The Black Hermit*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL* 4.2(2017): 69-75.

**INTRODUCTION**

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kenyan writer. His play 'The Black Hermit' was his first play, and the first published East African play. It is produced while he was studying English language at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, 1962. It was after Ugandan Independence. The play was first published in a small edition by Makerere University Press in 1963 and republished in Heinemann's African Writers Series in 1968. It is concerned with political, social, cultural and economic issues of postcolonial Africa, including Kenya Ngugi's homeland. Also, it reflects the issues discussed by 20<sup>th</sup> century literature in general and 20<sup>th</sup> century African literature in particular. In addition, it focuses on issues faced by the people of the African rural areas.

African continent suffered and still suffers from many rural issues in this postcolonial era such as weakness of development in many African countries, issues of tribalism, racism, migration, rural women issues, human rights and good governance in general. These issues need studies and discussions by the scholars in order to find possible solutions.

Many African writers such as Ngugi, Chinua Achebe, Alan Paton, Altyb Salih, Camara laye etc. are concerned with these issues in their writings. Ngugi's 'The Black Hermit' is one of these writings. So, it can be focused on throughout this study to shed lights to these issues.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objectives of this study are:

- 1- To find out the rural issues of African countries reflected by Ngugi's play 'The Black Hermit'.
- 2- To find out the causes of these rural issues and problems.
- 3- To propose some possible solutions to above mentioned issues.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of this study is derived from the fact that it tries to find out some solutions to some rural issues and disparities that have affected and still affecting most countries of African continent. As mentioned previously, many African countries still suffer from many rural issues, including, weakness of education and development in general, migration of youth and many other problems connected to the life

of rural woman. . Yet, these types of studies will help the African countries and nations to solve these problems by giving more attention to the rural development. Also, the above mentioned issues directly affect the life of the African rural citizens, including the Sudanese rural people.

**LITERATURE REVIEW****NGUGI AND COMMUNITY ISSUES**

In African context, it is very difficult to separate literature from the community and politics. Sampson (1970; 765) contends that African literature is generally strong in the field of realistic literature usually with political implications focusing mainly on nationalism, freedom, democracy, equality, reconciliation, independence, justice human dignity and national unity.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is one of these post-colonial writers who stressed these issues. He stressed the issues of African identity, peace and stability. Ngugi in his literary works such as his novel 'A Grain of Wheat' he mainly focused on the representation of African culture and reality, revolting against colonialism, neocolonialism and corruption. (Harrow 1994, 84).

As it is known in 1962 Uganda became independent. Yet, 'The Black Hermit' first produced at the Uganda national theatre was one of the demands of contribution and celebration of Uhuru (independence). Obviously, the play concerns itself with the community and national issues which were prominent at that time in many African countries including Uganda in which Ngugi was studding and Kenya his own homeland.

Ngugi then in the play focused on such community or social and political issues such as nationalism, freedom, independence, ethnicity, gender, commitment to traditions and culture etc. In The Black Hermit Remi is considered to be the political saviour of his ethnic group as well as the nation in several occasions. The Elder laments that with his education Remi could have saved the ethnic group in forming a political party. He could have uplifted Marua ethnic group to political power. In fact, Remi had a vision in which the Marua would become powerful dominating the whole country". However, due to Remi's subsequent escape to the city, as the leader of Marua says, their group waits



under a government composed of other tribes. Clearly, instead of a peaceful multi-ethnic nation-state, the Maruas want an ethnic polity. (Chakraborty 2014, 168).

Ngugi also stressed the issue of tribalism and its negative role in the process of development in African continent. Muhau (2012) believes that one of the most important lessons from *The Black Hermit* is how deep seated tribalism has stalled development and created tensions in the African society. Muhau (2012) thinks that from tribalism, religious and cultural conflicts to a leadership crisis the play brings real life experiences on stage and the players enact the conflicts, tensions and changes in Kenyan society which is the microcosm of the situation in many African countries. The problems in 'The Black Hermit' are real. They were real then and still exist even today in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and the rest of Africa. For example, Ngugi wants to show how badly tribalism and racism have stalled development in these countries.

Also, tribalism is a deep-rooted problem in many African countries. Africa suffered and still suffers from many civil and tribal wars. For instance, there are many cases of people getting a job based not on their qualifications or competence but tribal orientation. Of course, tribalism and racism create tension and disunity, so Ngugi wants to fight them. They are an obstacle to development because people waste time, money and energies on things that don't matter at all. As a result of tribalism in the *Black Hermit* people are not united against a system that is responsible for their measurable lives. The play is against this situation and through Remi, the protagonist of the play the writer calls for turning to heart and mind to create a nation, then will tribe and race disappear. (Muhau, 2012).

Muhau (2012), in addition, believes that the playwright wants the audience to understand that society is bait only if people are responsible. Responsibility is one of the main lessons in the play. Ngugi also shows this through Remi who runs away from taking care of widowed mother, his wife and village. He is only well educated man in the village and everyone has his/her hope in him for political and religious leadership; but he tries to escape. He fails and that is the whole tragedy that unfolds.

The plays of Ngugi in general are applicable to the real life situations. They were all structured to be applicable to the immediate realities. Ngugi said, "I've always written plays as a result of some kind of request, so there's always been some kind of communal demand for me to present a script" (Wilkinson 1992: 124). Cited in Vandersmit (2007) who believes that Ngugi's plays became theatre in a period of social unrest. Each examines the consequences of political events as they have an effect on the lives of members of the community. So, it is believed that Ngugi's plays have another unique quality – they can be adapted to suit most Third World countries and all of colonized Africa. (Vandersmit 2007, 188).

As made obvious in the previous paragraphs, there are many social, political, economic and cultural issues that are addressed by Ngugi in his literary works. Some of these issues are studied and discussed by some scholars. In this paper, the researcher tries to shed lights to issues of African rural areas reflected by Ngugi in his play 'The Black Hermit'.

#### **METHOD OF THE STUDY**

The study adopts the descriptive method for analyzing rural life issues reflected by the Kenyan dramatist Ngugi in his play 'The Black Hermit'. The data of the study represent the play itself, which is presented and analyzed rationally. Rational Analysis is known to be an important tool in literary researches, for via it the writer's ideas, language and style are examined. Hence, the rational analysis to the play is followed with especial focus on the African rural issues made obvious by the writer.

As it is underlined by Al-Samawi (2000), in literary context rational analysis is generally performed on the basis of social norms and literary norms. Yet, social norms are concerned with social aspects, such as social conducts, values, issues and morals. The main source of the data in these studies is the printed materials (the literary works themselves). Sometimes, such analysis is done on cultural and social bases, where the researcher analyzes the works of people from one culture on the basis of the social aspects and values of another culture and arrives at specific conclusions.



In this consideration, Robert (1978) believes that the aim of literary analysis is to address the writers' insights into the problems of life, and underline the various aspects of their skill. "Analyzing a work is a means toward appreciation and evaluation, not an end in itself. It is an honest attempt by you, the reader, to discover the truth about the work and to base your appreciation on your own thought and discovery, not on a vaguely aesthetic reaction." (Robert 1978, 7).

In this study, the rural issues reflected by Ngugi in 'The Black Hermit' will first be discussed and analyzed. Also, the researcher will try to compare these issues with the Sudanese real situation to reach to some conclusions. Of course, rural life issues of Sudan are the same in many other African countries. So, directly or indirectly the study addresses the rural issues of Africa as whole.

#### **ANALYSIS OF RURAL ISSUES IN THE BLACK HERMIT**

This part tries to rationally analyze and discuss some of the important African rural life issues underlined by Ngugi in his social play 'The Black Hermit'. The focus will mainly be on three very important issues related to African rural life: Weakness of education, suffering of African rural women and the issues of migration of rural youth and its impact on their communities:

#### **EDUCATION IN AFRICAN RURAL AREAS**

The issue of education weakness in African rural areas is very important issue; because education is the backbone of human development. As indicated by Vandermitt (2007, 234) Ngugi recognizes education as a necessary qualification for advancement. In the Black Hermit, Ngugi demonstrated this issue through the protagonist or the hero Remi. His role, personality and behavior lay much stress on the importance of education and its weakness in African rural areas, including Ngugi's own homeland of Kenya. As the only educated man of his tribe to reach the university; Remi is the hope of his community to solve their problems and disparities. Of course, the fact that Remi is the only educated man of the tribe reveals the weakness of education in Kenyan rural areas and Africa as whole. This issue is clearly echoed by what one of the elders says to Nyobi: "Remi, your son and ours, is the only

educated man in all the land, exceeding in knowledge all the people, black and white put together". (The Black Hermit, Act 1, Scene 1, p.9). This issue is exemplified also in many other places in the play. One more example is Remi's words to his friend Omenge in the city: "Yes. I had the misfortune of being the first in my tribe to reach University. You know it's a small tribe. Elders listened to my voice." (The Black Hermit, Act II, Scene II, p. 31).

It is previously made obvious that these rural issues will be compared to the real situation in Sudan. So, it can be said that the Sudanese rural life situation resembles to what has been described in the play concerning the issue of education weakness in the rural areas of Africa. In this consideration, the World Bank estimates suggest that, on average, 90% of all children in northern Sudan had access to a formal school in 2010. However, problems in access to schooling by gender and location persist. Still there are regional disparities in access to education by children in rural areas, with girls facing the greatest disadvantage in terms of access to schooling. The study stressed that the challenges ahead relate not only to reducing these problems in access, but in improving the efficiency of the education system to produce young adults equipped with the skills and knowledge to secure their livelihoods and contribute towards society. (World Bank 2012).

To researcher's point of view, as one of the Darfur citizens spent nearly 20 years in Darfur and more than ten years in Blue Nile state, one observed many obstacles and problems faced by pupils/ students of rural areas. Examples of these problems like distance of schools from the residence of students, shortage of teachers and their incapability because of their low level education, unhealthy educational environment, shortage of textbooks, etc. In addition, there are many other problems created by the ongoing civil wars. In the case of girls, the situation is much more complicated. Just as an example, in Blue Nile's area of Kdallo which is inhabited by nearly 20,000 citizens I found in 2007 that there is only one female graduate! This is due to some above mentioned problems faced by rural citizens. Generally, it can be said that the above mentioned problems of education exist in many other rural areas in Sudan especially in the terminal areas.



## RURAL WOMEN ISSUES

The suffering of rural woman is one of the issues that are depicted in *The Black Hermit*. It is highlighted through the suffering of Thoni (Remi's wife) and Nyobi (his widowed mother). They suffered a lot physically and psychologically due to the absence of Remi the man of the family. Consider the dialogue between Remi and Jane his white girl friend in the city: " Jane: Come, tell me about your mother. You are always so silent about your family. Remi: She is old, goes to the river for water, to the forest for firewood- and of course she worries over me." (*The Black Hermit*, Act II, Scene I, p. 25). Not only Remi's family, but also the whole his community is negatively affected by his migration to the city. Also, although many years have passed since these words are written, but still the same issues addressed by Ngugi exist in many African rural areas. Still there are problem of water resources and the other daily needs of the rural people in Africa.

In addition to the suffering of rural women that connected to developmental issues; there is also another kind of suffering that is depicted in the play through Thoni. It is the emotional problem. Rural women in particular in many cases are the victims of social customs and tribal traditions. First, after the death of her first husband, Thoni was forced to marry Remi his brother mainly as a respect of tribal traditions. Secondly, Remi escaped to the city leaving Thoni behind in the village and socially Thoni is demanded to keep silent and to suffer silently. Rural girls in general are very shy in expressing their feelings and emotions even to their husbands. So, men and in particular husbands are demanded to be sensitive toward their wives. In the *Black Hermit* this issue led to the suicide of Thoni at the end of the play because Remi in his return to the village even after his long absence didn't give her a chance to express her feelings to him: " Remi: What have I done? What have I done? (Drums beat in slow rhythm. A procession of elders and women led by the leader file onto the stage. Four men carry Thoni's body on a stretcher. They put it down and step to the side. The pastor steps forward) Pastor: Stand you not near her, though she took her own life, she was holy, she was of God." (*The Black Hermit*, Act III, Scene II, p. 75).

As mentioned previously, to join the play to the reality in Africa I compare Ngugi's realistic imagination with the real life situations in Sudan as an example of African countries. In this consideration, Grawert (2012, 4) states that the UN 'Decade of the Women' 1975-1985 has initiated a spread of field Studies on women's position in economy and society in most countries of the world, including Sudan. She says that emphasis was put on women's work in the labour that followed, and that scholars who concerned on woman studies tried to connect this issue with rural development and food production for direct consumption by rural families. These studies highlighted the important role played by the rural women in their communities and also the suffering faced them. Also, in this direction, some present reports by women themselves confirm that in some Sudanese rural areas such as Darfur, 60% of herding and agricultural work is done by women. In this consideration, Osman (2011) conducted study on the role of women in achieving household food security in the Western Region of Sudan, an area much affected by the impacts of drought and civil conflicts. Her results demonstrate that women play a major role in producing and providing food for their households in this high-risk climate and conflict area, while men are more likely to migrate seasonally and even permanently. In addition, women are responsible for food preparation, processing, and food preservation and are wholly responsible for attending to household garden plots. They therefore contribute more to household food security than men.

## MIGRATION OF RURAL YOUTH

As it is well known the migration of rural youth and rural people in general has many negative impacts on their families, areas and the immigrants themselves. This issue is also made obvious in the play (*The Black Hermit*). It is underlined in many instances. The migration of the protagonist Remi from his village to the city is one example of this issue. Due to Remi's migration; his family, tribe, religious men and their whole area suffered a lot from his absence. So, two delegations from the elders of the tribe and religious men are sent to the city to persuade Remi to return to his people as their only hope to solve their disparities and to be their



leader and representative in newly created national government. Consider the dialogue between Remi and the pastor in the city: " *Remi: Go back to the village, tell the elders this: If they need me, I'll come. If you Christians want me, I'll not fail you. If my mother calls for me, I'll not again disappoint her hopes...Pastor: God bless you my child. Remi: I have been too long a hermit in the city. I'd thought I'd escape from things that were me- That were part of my life. I must now rise and go to the country. For I must serve our people, save them from traditions and bad customs, free them from tribal manacles.*" (The Black Hermit, Act II, Scene III, p. 44-45). These words stress the negative impacts of the migration of youth to their people and areas. It negatively affects the development process, to the life of their families, people, communities, countries, etc. The migration though its advantages in general it has negative cultural and social effects on immigrants themselves, especially if the migration is out of their countries. In this consideration, UN annual report in (2013) on 'The impact of youth migration on individuals and communities' indicates that the migration affects both the young migrants themselves and those young and old persons left behind. It has a direct and often profound impact on migrants and their immediate families, but the wider community can be directly or indirectly affected as well. The report stresses that the consequences are complex, context-specific and subject to change over time.

The report also stresses the negative effects of international migration on places of origin. The report underlined that the international migration can improve the social and economic welfare of young migrants and contributes to greater economic efficiency in receiving countries. However, its impact on countries of origin tends to be mixed. According to the report, one of the most serious adverse effects is human capital flight, or brain drain, which deprives countries of origin of the economic and social contributions of their best educated and most highly skilled citizens. The negative impact of brain drain migration is particularly evident in the health and education sectors of developing countries, as well as in small developing countries, where the pool of professionals is limited.

In addition, the report focused on the impact on youth left behind by migrant parents. As made obvious by the UN report, migration and remittances have both positive and negative effects on youth left behind. Traditionally, guiding children through their formative years has been a primary function of parents, and the absence of one or both parents can have a serious impact on the psychological, emotional and social development of boys and girls during their childhood and youth. At the same time, young people left behind may develop the capacity for independent decision-making as they assume greater responsibility for the well-being of the household at home. Financial transfers from family members living abroad improve the social and economic welfare of migrants' children when they are used for education, clothing, health care and other basic needs. However, remittances can also promote dependency among youth and other household members left behind. Taken together, the lack of parental supervision and the availability of what may be seen as discretionary funds may increase the likelihood that youth left behind will engage in risky behaviours.

All impacts of migration with all its kinds; that have been mentioned by UN report one can observe them in Sudanese society whether in urban or rural areas. Of course, many African countries face the same situation.

### CONCLUSION

As made obvious previously, the study attempted to find out the rural life issues of African countries reflected by Ngugi's play 'The Black Hermit', their causes and to find out some possible solutions to the above mentioned issues. So, based on the analysis of data a number of findings have been obtained as follow:

There are many rural issues that reflected by Ngugi in his play 'the Black Hermit'. Most prominent of them are: the weakness of education in rural areas and the weakness of development as whole, the physical and psychological suffering of the rural women due to the huge pressure and role put on them, the issue of rural people including youth migration and their negative impacts on their families, people and areas such as human capital flight or migration of brain drain, negative



psychological, emotional and social impact of migration on youth and children left behind by migrant parents and children may engage in risky behaviours due to the lack of parental supervision. Other important issues discussed in the play are spread of tribalism and racism especially among rural communities and their negative role in the process of development in African continent.

The main causes of weakness of education of rural areas are distance of schools from the residence of students, shortage of teachers and their incapability in some cases because of their low level education, unhealthy educational environment and shortage of textbooks. Also, the causes of the rural women suffering are the weak role played by the rural men in most cases, migration of men in general and negative social customs and tribal traditions connected to the life of rural women and their expected responsibilities and roles. While for the migration of youth, the main causes are the weakness of development in rural areas, economic pressures and the spread of civil wars in these areas. The issues mentioned above exist in many African countries including those covered by the study such as Kenya and Sudan.

According to the study, there are many solutions to the rural issues. Among them are: comprehensive rural development, including promoting rural education sector in general, activating the role of the rural men to take the major part of work and responsibilities done by women and respecting their physical, emotional and psychological aspects. Concerning the migration, it is necessary to reduce the migration of rural youth, brain drain as good as possible through the development of their own areas and economic positions to encourage their return to their areas and even countries to participate in the process of development. Also, development of the sense of nationalism and unity and religious values to reduce the tribalism and racism.

Based on what has been concluded, the researcher recommends the following: the African governments, communities, NGOs and even international organizations need to cooperate for realization of comprehensive African rural development, change of some negative social

customs and tribal traditions in order to put an end to the rural issues mentioned by the study. Also, literature in general can be used as an effective medium for social change.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Sampson, George. (1970) *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* Third Edition, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain .
- [2]. Harrow, Kenneth. (1994) *Thresholds of Change in African Literature: The Emergence of a Tradition*. Portsmouth and London .
- [3]. Chakraborty, Amitayu (2014) Nationalism, Ethnicity and Gender in Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* /*The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.6, no.9, May 2014.
- [4]. Muhau, Daniel. (2012) *The Black Hermit; Key Lessons for Tribalism*, posted by NDYANABO NEWS on Monday, May 14, 2012 at 2:00 AM, East Africa-Tanzania.
- [5]. Robert, Edger. (1978), *Thinking and Writing About Literature*, Lehman College, The City University of New York.
- [6]. Al-Samawi, Ahmed. (2000), *Research Methods*, Sana'a University, Yemen
- [7]. Vandersmit, S.A. (2007) *Ngugi WA Thiong'o and Kenyan Theatre In Focus*. The University of Namibia.
- [8]. Ngugi, James. (1968) *The Black Hermit*, Heinemann Educational Books, Nairobi, London, Ibadan.
- [9]. The World Bank, January (2012), *The Status of the Education Sector In Sudan*. World Bank Studies.(<http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8857-0>)
- [10]. Grawert, Elke. (2012) *Making a Living in Rural Sudan, Production of women, labour Migration of Men, and Policies for Peasants' Needs*. University of Bremen, Germany.
- [11]. Osman, Fatma. (2011), *Challenges and possibilities for achieving household food security in the Western Sudan region: the role of female farmers*. /Springer Science + Business Media B.V. & International Society for Plant Pathology / <https://www.springer.com/life+sciences/agriculture/journal/12571>
- [12]. UN Administrator 2 (30 December, 2013), *The Impact of Youth Migration on individuals and communities* /<http://www.unworldyouthreport.org/Social.un.org/index/youth.aspx>